



The Gender of Suicide

Knowledge
Theory and

KATRINA JAWORSKI

The Gender of Suicide

Knowledge Production, Theory and Suicidology

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ASHGATE

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THE GENDER OF SUICIDE

This book is dedicated to three people without whom I could never have written this book:

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knowledge and scholarship.*

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Vic Beasley who, many years ago, recognized the birth of the writing voice that appears in these pages.

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Understanding Suicide through Gender: An Introduction

In the Beginning

I might as well say it at the beginning. It is difficult for me to think and write about suicide. Half of the time I wish I never did. Personal experiences with suicide influence my writing. Here is one example.

It is roughly three o'clock in the morning. The world is asleep. Suddenly, my bedroom door bursts open and the flick of the light switch shatters the fragility of the night's darkness. My mother is crying as she climbs into my bed. Surprised and confused at first, I quickly register what is going on. There is a sense of familiarity about my mother's actions and the pain written across her face. There is also the familiar sound of smashing plates and the too familiar angry, drunken voice of my father, who suddenly appears in the doorway to my bedroom screaming what is unspeakable yet clearly understood even by me as a young child. He is drunk and enraged. His eyes are bloodshot and sweat pours from his face down to his stained white singlet. My mother continues to cry, hugging me as if I represent safety. With slurred speech, my father begins to threaten but these threats are different this time. They are accompanied with hand actions, representing the words being spoken. He wants to commit suicide. As he speaks, his hands move across the throat in a slash-like manner. His veins seem to appear just beneath the surface of his skin; they stand out against the redness of his neck. He repeats his intentions, emphasized through bodily movements, as he proceeds to the next room of the apartment.

This is a confronting memory to recount, tell and write. It conveys a disturbing picture, filled with dread, fear, violence and intense distress. I bore witness to something very traumatic as a young child. I came face to face with something incredibly painful, complex and existentially profound that night – and as a writer, I cannot separate myself from it.

In *Saint Foucault*, David Halperin reflects on a similar problem. He writes:

It's always interesting to find oneself in a situation that one can't write one's way out of. The impasse may be a clue to something real, an indication that one has stumbled upon something of potentially wider significance than one's own

limitations, onto some major organizing structure of social meaning or some irreducible law of cultural discourse. In this case, what I had stumbled upon turned out to be at least one basis for my identification with Foucault: namely, the permanent crisis of authority faced by any intellectual in our society who is also gay. (Halperin 1995: 10)

I invite my readers to consider that my writing is bound to suicide. This creates tensions and difficulties. On the one hand, personal and painful experiences inform my writing. On the other hand, I am continually confronted by the highly objective, neutralized academic prose required in academic writing about suicide. Where the former offers an opportunity to be open and honest, the latter demands I remain distanced from personal associations with suicide. Writing becomes a strange case of wanting to conceal yet transcend one's biography in a time when the confessional culture dominates.

There are advantages to my position. My difficulty with writing on suicide provides an opportunity to question how we understand suicide, and how this understanding is constructed in the way that it is. Whenever I hear someone speak of suicide, I wonder why they think the way they do. I wonder whether what researchers write about suicide differs from the interpretations of those who experience it. I wonder what those who died would say if they knew how their deaths were interpreted by the living. Would they approve? Or would they be surprised, dismayed, or even outraged? These questions always remind me of how important it is to handle suicide in respectful ways. Finding respectful and incisive tools to explore how we understand suicide is an ever-present challenge to which I hope to do justice here.

The Problem and the Argument

Suicide is a constant presence in contemporary western societies. It sits painfully in our world. It is enumerated in death statistics, categorized by age, tabulated by gender, concealed with hasty adaptations to religious ritual, quietly nested against unspoken sexualities, or situated indeterminately in questions of race. Suicide seems so familiar; yet it defies us. Its reach is catastrophic; its aftermath tragic. Suicide comes to our notice in varied forms, each acting to reveal yet also mask what we 'know' to be suicide: suicide as genuine attempt, suicide as 'attention-seeking behaviour', suicide publicly unspoken yet locally known. It stems from private despair attached to celebrity deaths, or takes the form of a political statement writ large through the spectre of 'the suicide bomber'. It appears, muted, in publicized accounts of Indigenous deaths. Like death, suicide presents us with aspects of the unfathomable, but with something added: the incongruity of a life that seeks its own end.

But there is a problem. Suicide is studied more than ever. We know why it happens, what the signs are likely to be, and how we can respond so that we can prevent it. Yet so little is written about how this knowledge is constructed – how ideas, assumptions and practices of knowing determine what suicide means. *How* we know *what* we know is either unnoticed or taken for granted, treated as self-evident and in need of no explanation. But there is more. Gender plays a central role not only in how knowledge of suicide is constructed but also in how this knowledge is taken for granted. This is despite the fact that, as I will show throughout this book, gender *is* central to understanding suicide. It plays a covert, yet at the same time overt, role in understanding suicide. Nevertheless many problematic assumptions about gender frame some experiences as serious, valid and legitimate at the expense of others being less so.

I want to come back to my father for a moment. How do we understand the meaning of his actions? Were they serious? Does his masculine body have anything to do with how we interpret his intentions? What about the fact that he was a man and not a woman? Does this matter? If I distil these questions into broader ones, then they are as follows: Is suicide made intelligible through gender? If so, how? How does the body come to matter in suicide? How does gender figure in the production of knowledge of suicide? How does gender affect the way we understand agency in suicide? What are the limits to what we know of suicide? What do they offer, to whom, and to what ends?

With these questions in mind, *The Gender of Suicide* is a critical intervention into suicide as an epistemological object and subject of study. It shows that it is timely and critical that we, the living, review how society comes to know suicide. We become so busy trying to pinpoint the confronting nature of suicide to the point where we forget to question the role we play in this painful enterprise. This is not about carrying personal epistemological wounds. This is about reviewing how implicit meanings of gender sit uninterrogated in bodies and sites of knowledge in charge of making sense of suicide. Drawing on theoretical tools situated under the banners of post-structuralism, postmodernism, feminism and post-feminism, I contextualize and analyse how suicide is understood in sociology, law, medicine, psy-knowledge and newsprint media, to demonstrate that gender is central to knowing suicide and, as such, there is nothing self-evident about it. The central argument is that the gender of suicide is masculine and masculinist. And as I will demonstrate, the character of the gender of suicide is in fact performative.

Why is this important? Why should we care? We should care not only because people either die or suffer as a result of suicide. We should care because *how* we know *what* we know is at the heart of understanding suicide. Without knowledge – without theoretical understandings – we would not know how to act, to respond and prevent suicide. But there is more to this kind of knowledge. As Judith Butler acknowledges, ‘something besides theory must take place, such

as interventions at social and political levels ... which are not quite the same as exercises of theory' (2004a: 204). This could not be truer in the context of suicide, where applied practice is central to preventing suicide. Yet as Butler also reminds us, 'in all of these practices, theory is presupposed' (Butler 2004a: 205). If we do not know how ideas work, our efforts to understand and prevent suicide will be undermined by the very assumptions operating in our efforts.

Knowing suicide is not just a matter of exposing what already exists, as if it were self-evident, transparent and obvious. To borrow from Butler, knowledge is 'implicated in social processes, inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in their social meanings' (2004a: 20). Gender is part of the parcel through which knowledge of suicide is produced. How gender 'works' is complicated. It occurs in multiple, heterogeneous ways. Sometimes suicide seems gender-neutral. Sometimes suicide is heavily imbued by gender. Sometimes gender assumptions are visible and invisible. The masculine and masculinist side of gender dominates. In so doing, it leads us to think that there is only a singular or homogenous way of reading suicide.

In wanting to understand how knowledge of suicide is constructed through gender, this book focuses on suicidology as a culturally and socially significant knowledge base for understanding suicide. I have a love-hate relationship with this knowledge base. It contributes so much to what we know of suicide. It has done so much good towards suicide prevention. It has, I think, made suicide *intelligible* in particular ways. Established in the United States in 1968 by Edwin Shneidman, suicidology is a field committed to the study of suicide, aimed at promoting greater public awareness and education to reduce death and dying through suicide. Researchers and practitioners from various disciplinary backgrounds generate its expertise. It produces different sites of 'facts' that speak of, and for, those who are no longer alive, as well as those who continue to live after suicide attempts. Yet as Brown (2001) explains, suicidology has disciplined suicide to the point where certain ways of knowing are preferred over others. Suicide becomes intelligible in particular ways – it is interpreted, identified, recognized and verified as legitimate knowledge across various sites of practising this knowledge. And this is where my love for suicidology weakens.

Key Themes and Issues

The fleshiness of the corporeal body plays a key role in the gender of suicide as masculine and masculinist. The body is not a site for simply discovering signs, marks and meanings concerning suicide. Suicide materializes, or takes shape, through different bodily practices, each caught in the webs of power, exercised in varying degrees in different sites of practice. These in turn are interlinked with what is conceptualized as active and passive in suicide – binary differences that

frame our understandings of violence. I look at notions of agency, materialized through notions of autonomy, mastery and instrumentality, and made visible through actions considered violent.

The focus on the material body does not mean that suicide is individual only. Individual actions are influenced by particular meanings and assumptions and these also influence what is and is not said about suicide. As I will explain in different chapters, material bodies – particularly those no longer displaying vital signs – are spoken for, and can only ever be spoken for. Yet being spoken for produces meanings for material bodies. As Davis points out, death is ‘an interruption to the production of meaning; it curtails our dialogue with the deceased as it removes their ability to speak to us’ (2004: 77). But as some chapters also demonstrate, material bodies that continue to live past attempting suicide are commonly framed as ‘failed’ and ‘unsuccessful’. They too are spoken for, often in deterministic and agency-denying ways. Methods of suicide, such as the use of firearms or poisons, frame the *intelligibility* of suicide, by which I mean the discursive conditions which enable the gendering of suicide.

While the terms ‘gender’, ‘gendering’, ‘masculine’ and ‘masculinist’ are continually elaborated in the book, I think it is useful at this point to foreshadow their meaning. ‘Gender’ in suicide refers to *one* of the ways through which this death is distinguished from others. While it plays a crucial role in interpreting suicide, gender alone does not and cannot explain everything there is about suicide. When it does explain suicide, gender refers to masculinities and femininities and to their production and reproduction. In this sense, gender is a discursive means through which corporeal bodies are falsely interpreted as only naturally and neutrally ‘male’ and ‘female’ (Butler 1990, 1993a, 2004a). Gender is made sense of in suicide through binary pairs: male–female and masculine–feminine, but also completed–attempted and active–passive.

Where the concept of gender is used to signal what has come to be known, ‘gendering’ relates to how what is known becomes known in suicide. I want to stress that gendering is not synonymous with gender. While one cannot be thought of without the other, for heuristic purposes I want to distinguish gendering as the process of invoking or hailing suicide. Gendering as materialization is part of giving material form to suicide. I use gendering to examine how assumptions about gender shape which experiences of suicide do and do not count as legitimate and valid – intelligible – for the purpose of maintaining others as abject. But there is something strange about all of this. Dominant and universalized meanings and experiences of suicide need the abject status of other meanings and experiences. The fleshiness of bodies is crucial to this process, etched with meanings already interpreted as gendered and still awaiting interpretation. In making the case for suicide as masculine and masculinist, I show that sometimes gendering is concealed from view especially in the interpretation of what is active and passive. By using gendering as an

analytical concept, my task is not about debating or determining the facticity, or the material fact of suicide. Rather, I toil at working out what shapes the interpretation of different suicidal outcomes. The implications this has for calculating agency and intent are important since they do not operate in neutral and self-evident ways.

Similarly to the difference between gender and gendering, what is 'masculine' does not stand for what is masculinist. What is masculine refers to normative performances of male gender, marked by selective instrumentality, visible forms of violence, aggressiveness and independence (Connell 2000, Petersen 1998). However, as both Judith Butler (1990, 2004a) and Judith Halberstam (1998) insist, masculinity speaks *to* the male gender, but is not *of* it. Centred on the Enlightenment postulation of the 'Man of Reason' in Western philosophy, 'masculinist' refers to an exclusively gendered subject ideal articulated as male, rational, abstract, objective, neutral, white, heterosexual and universal, transcending not only time but also nature, and the material body in particular (Harding 1987, Hekman 1990, Lloyd 1984, Milligan 1992, Rooney 1991, Ruddick 1987). These are the prime conditions under which a valid subjective position is recognized. By arguing that suicide is masculine and masculinist, I examine the effects of the masculinist subject ideal in the privileging of some gendered truths over others.

Obviously, what counts as 'truth' in suicide is at the heart of this book. I will come back to truth in a little while. For now I want to emphasize that it is important to examine truth from multiple angles to see how it is contained and normalized. This is because knowledge is often made possible through a complex interrelation between powerful bodies of knowledge, such as law and psychiatry, and 'the institutional spaces in which they operate' (Bunton and Petersen 1997: 4). Although the argument of *The Gender of Suicide* does not show precisely how each discursive site is interlinked with another, it still works towards showing how institutionally significant bodies of knowledge such as sociology, law, medicine, psy-knowledge and newsprint media illuminate the gendering of suicide. For this reason, it is important to examine their specific discursive mechanics, to understand how knowledge about suicide is constructed.

The key issue then is that suicide is not self-evident, neutral and free floating, 'out there' somewhere in society, to be caught by the nets of sites of practice required to know about it and to respond. This demands us to consider the *manner* through which we come to know suicide, and how this manner is shaped by gender. My thinking is influenced by Foucault's insistence that 'It is therefore not a matter of describing what knowledge is and what power is and how one would repress the other ... but rather, a nexus of knowledge-power has to be described so that we can grasp what constitutes the acceptability of a system' (1997b: 52–3). Thus, my purpose is not only about working out how we understand suicide, but also tracking how knowledge and understanding do not

work – how they fail in maintaining the very claims they seek to establish. This, I think, is important to imagining possibilities for changing how we understand the confronting nature of suicide.

Let me be clear about what I mean by change. I do not mean this book to offer an alternative framework to replace older views with ones generated here. While I do theorize the gender of suicide, I do not offer suggestions as to how older views should change or how my theorization should be applied. This, I believe, would require a different kind of work to what I offer here, with different aims and tasks in mind. But I do envisage change at an epistemic level, hypothesizing a stage where it will be possible to problematize the conceptual parameters of suicide and create knowledge that is more gender-aware and gender-compassionate. Once again I return to Foucault, and in particular a passage of his that deeply moves and inspires me as an intellectual. He writes:

Never consent to be completely comfortable with your own certainties. Never let them sleep, but never believe either that a new fact will be enough to reverse them. Never imagine that one can change them like arbitrary axioms. Remember that, in order to give them an indispensable mobility, one must see far, but also close-up and right around oneself. One must clearly feel that everything perceived is only evident when surrounded by a familiar and poorly known horizon, that each certitude is only sure because of the support offered by unexplored ground. The most fragile instant has roots. (Foucault 1997b: 144)

Foucault's point shows just how crucial it is to work towards opening a space in which it is possible to debate and contest gendered assumptions about suicide. By contestation I do not mean we ought to get rid of gender altogether. This is precisely what this book does *not* seek to achieve. Instead, it seeks to generate space for further critique and a vision that recognizes the impact of cultural assumptions on how we come to know suicide. It also seeks to undermine a form of epistemic violence, by which I mean an interpretive act that is itself deathlike, continually denying the autonomy and agency of divergent voices and experiences that deserve to be heard and recognized in our understandings of suicide.

My Hermeneutic Suitcase

As much as I love theory and anything theoretical (well almost), I always get annoyed when authors do not reveal the very tools that enable their analyses. I get annoyed even if I love the actual scholarly argument. After all, neither thinking nor its labour happens by itself. I suppose it would be cumbersome always to write about one's tools. But it would be very helpful if authors did,

especially when their books become pedagogical sources for teaching others how to think *through* ideas rather than *about* them. Following a Foucauldian approach, I want to reveal the analytical tools in my hermeneutic suitcase so that those who read my work can understand where I am coming from and how I arrived at my conclusions. I do this because lack of attention to tools of interpretation is at the heart of my quarrel with suicidology's approach to suicide. While suicidology explains its methods of research in concrete and factual ways, it forgets that methods themselves might frame how we understand suicide.

My suitcase is framed by philosophies and theories loosely located under the banner of the 'posts'. Throughout the book, I mobilize valuable intellectual resources offered by writers and scholars located in post-structuralism, postmodernism, feminism, post-feminism and postcoloniality. There are of course many crossovers among these. Each field is bound to its own history of development. Without wanting to tame the 'posts', both post-structuralism and postmodernism enable me to understand that human reality, including suicide, is a product of complex and interrelated practices, bound to social, cultural and historical contexts (Jameson 1991, 1998, Sarup 1993). What must be questioned is how various social categories, discourses and institutions exist in their contexts of production. This questioning enables us to see reality as real precisely because it is interpreted through multiple and fragmented meanings that do not always add up or make sense (Lovell 2000). Post-structuralism and postmodernism are valuable because they help me to show how power is part of key concepts and ideas of suicide.

Of equal importance are feminist and post-feminist philosophies. Both have maintained an uneasy alliance with the 'posts', even though both have sought to develop new ways of critiquing traditional philosophies (Fraser and Nicholson 1990). Like post-structuralism and postmodernism, feminism has a history of critiquing norms about gender and sexuality (Weedon 2000). Post-structural and postmodern approaches in feminism deploy a critical lens to examine the presumed stability of identity categories such as 'woman'. And then there is post-feminism, which, as I understand it, does not mean we have moved beyond feminism. Instead, post-feminism is an intricate field that deploys tools from psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, postmodernism and postcolonialism to unpack constructs such as man-woman, male-female and masculine-feminine because they elide complex workings of power, knowledge and norms (Bell 1999; Brooks 1997). I find post-feminism valuable for it allows me to see gender as one epistemological condition of understanding suicide, and in so doing welcome race and sexuality as significant to working out the gendering of suicide.

Whether I like it or not, I am an 'organic intellectual', a phrase that belongs to Antonio Gramsci (1971) and Edward Said (1994). Borrowing from Gramsci (1971), Said writes that this phrase describes someone who knows that being